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A Talk With Sen. Denton

Sen. Jeremiah Denton (R-Ala.), head of the Senate subcommittee on security and terrorism, recently discussed the role of his subcommittee with members of the editorial page staff. The subcommittee's hearings on terrorism begin today.

Q: What is the mandate of this committee?

A: My concept has undergone some transformation. I've got two nouns: Security and Terrorism. Those are very broad terms, at least security is. It's almost omnivorous. I temporarily had the impression that my jurisdiction was purely domestic terrorism. But as I have proceeded with this thing and have been asked to work with the Select Committee on Intelligence by Sen. Barry Goldwater, asked to talk with CIA Director Bill Casey and having seen that there is sort of turf problem with the CIA and the FBI which we are reading about—and it's natural, it's bureaucratic—I find that they want me to look at the whole circuitry. I'm sure that farther down the pike we may be coming across some American who is being used as an agent, but that is an infinitesimal part of it. I'm not even thinking about that right now.

Q: In six, eight months, a year from now, do you see this committee as having other functions and mandates?

A: No. I don't see it happening. Functions and mandates, but only in the context of what I have already outlined.

Q: Joel Lisker, your subcommittee's staff director, is quoted in The Washington Post as saying that the subcommittee has a secret agenda. That's an exact quote. Organizations that it intends to investigate. Does the subcommittee have a secret agenda?

A: I don't know what he is talking about. I have never heard of it. I mean, he doesn't set the hearings up. I do. I told him what business I wanted to get done. He comes from an FBI background, okay?

Q: They have secret agendas?

A: They have secret agendas. I don't even know what he means. A secret agenda. That's pretty good. I can't imagine Joel being dumb enough to say something like that.

Q: Are you aware of the anxieties expressed by civil libertarians and others about the subcommittee's creation, given the past history of internal security subcommittees?

A: I believe that as far as mistakes made in the past, if one works from the conclusion that the government is infiltrated, infested with communists, and undertakes to prove suspicions about individuals, that is about 180 degrees away from where I am starting. I am springing from the assumption that every institution in the United States from academe to the media to the government and to the FBI recognizes that there are unmet, unchallenged, even unidentified threats to U.S. security.

But we are the opposite of proper subjects for disapproval by the civil libertarians. The object of preserving security is to preserve the civil liberties we enjoy. We're not going to transgress those civil liberties in our effort.

Q: How do you reassure those civil libertarians on very specific issues of the handling of hearings?

A: I could reassure them most simply in terms of my personal relationships. Although I had political disagreements with Allard Lowenstein, I had scores of hours of conversations with him. He didn't have any fears that, if I ever got involved in something like this, I would bulldoze around in it.

Q: Let's talk about McCarthyism and McCarthy techniques. You have said you want to avoid all that. Can you tell us what your conception of McCarthyism is?

A: We might have 30 major concepts of what McCarthyism is, and mine is not that firm. I don't say that everything he did was wrong. I just don't know that much. My own perception of him on television was one that turned me off, and I watched the guy. However, I don't know that much in detail about how evil the guy's motives or even techniques were.

Q: But there is something you want to avoid?

A: Well, the objective of his thrust had to be individuals within the United States who were disloyal. That is not what I am doing, nor is it in my sights to focus in on that. Having said that, let me remind you that in looking at the

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circuitry of terrorism and looking at security there will be occasions in which we will inevitably find that a, say, Soviet agent in the United States, of whom there are many, cannot himself do the job of espionage or even sabotage work. He has to find an American who is vulnerable. Whether it be because the guy's a drunk, or has some proclivities that he is ashamed of, or is turned off against the system by virtue of some extreme dissatisfaction—that poor individual can be involved in this. But to me, that's going to be an incidental. I mean, I'm not interested in that.

What I'm interested in is presenting what terrorism is today. We are talking about the preservation of freedom, the security of the United States in that context. If that doesn't appeal to any American, liberal or conservative, I don't know what does. If that's not what we are, then I don't know what we are.

Q: Does Secretary Haig share your general perspective on the functions of this subcommittee?

A: Yes, indeed. It was he with whom I arrived at the key sentence or two that defined my original concept of jurisdiction.

Q: Does Arnaud de Borchgrave's presence as a witness at your first major hearing mean that you are pursuing the idea that the press is infiltrated by the KGB, a theme of his novel, "The Spike"?

A: My modus operandi will be to try and go forward with a broad consensus among the press, among academics, among the church people. Perhaps it is an error to have [William] Colby, [Michael] Ledeen, de Borchgrave and [Claire] Sterling, but they happen to be here at the same time, which rarely occurs when a hearing room is available.

Now I'm going to make it clear during the hearing that, in subsequent hearings, we are going to have members of the National Council of Churches and the world peace movement. I'm going to have people come in here and say that unilateral disarmament by the United States is the best possible thing we can do for the preservation of freedom because it will be a good example to the Soviet Union. I'm going to let them develop the theme and I'm not going to insult them by contradicting them. I'm going to let in other points of view.

Yes, de Borchgrave. Since he wrote a book about disinformation, which is a reality, unfortunately, it's going to orient thinking about the first hearing. But I won't let him start telling sea stories. I don't want to imply that the subcommittee necessarily considers as documented fact everything that he tends to theorize about. I will try to establish that.

Q: Do you think there is a need for a new House Committee on Un-American Activities?

A: We used to have a saying in the Navy. The Army does pretty good work because of their organization; the Navy does good work because it doesn't have any organization. The reason I mention that is that whether it's advisable for there to be a House Un-American Activities Committee or internal security committee depends entirely on who the individuals are that form it. I don't know where they come from. I know where I'm coming from. Hell, I don't want to be here, as far as personal preference is concerned. I'm getting nothing out of this in terms of ego, money or any other thing. It's only if I can do any good.